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SUBJECT: INDIAN PANCHAYATIS GIVE GLOWING REPORT ON
PA-FUNDED PAKISTAN VISIT

1. The New Delhi-based Institute for Social Sciences (ISS) on June 16 hosted Pakistani High Commissioner Aziz Ahmed Khan for the formal release of the trip report detailing the two-week tour of Pakistan that ISS organized for 33 elected Indian local government representatives. The delegation of mayors and panchayatis (village councillors) was drawn from 18 states, was gender-balanced, and included at least one member each representing Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Christians, Dalits, and Scheduled Tribes.

2. This visit, largely funded by a USD 78,695 grant from the Embassy's Public Affairs Section, reciprocated the July 2004 first-ever tour of India (Punjab, Delhi, West Bengal, Karnataka, and Kerala) by 27 Pakistani locally-elected representatives that ISS organized, with Ford Foundation funding. The focus of both trips was to initiate grassroots, peer-to-peer cross-border contacts, to combat stereotypes and misperceptions, and to engage with counterparts on common problems and share lessons learned in the field of local governance.

Panchayatis to Pakistan

3. The Indian delegation crossed into Pakistan via the Wagah Border on March 14 and visited Lahore, Chakwal, Lala Musa, Multan, Muzaffargarh, Sargodha, and PM Singh's hometown of Gah (all in Punjab), as well as Islamabad, Peshawar, Hyderabad, and Karachi. Program organizer Dr. Ash Narain Roy told Poloff the greeting they received at each town and village was warmer and friendlier than the one before. The delegation met with their counterparts in local government, as well as with media, human rights organizations, women's groups, political activists, and civil society. They also talked with political party leaders, provincial ministers, and federal cabinet officials.

4. At each stop, the Indian delegation briefed their hosts on the panchayati raj system, and learned about Pakistan's 2001 Local Government Devolution Plan, according to Dr. Roy. Indian delegates who grew up in pre-Partition Pakistan, such as Amritsar's Dr. SS Chhina (born in Sargodha), visited their birthplaces, where entire villages welcomed them. Other highlights included celebrating Pakistan Day (March 23) and Holi (March 24) and holding a joint Indo-Pak peace rally in Multan, before returning to Delhi via Karachi on March 28.

5. In Lahore, the group met with Pakistani minorities (Christians and Baha'is) and discussed the common problems facing religious minority groups in South Asia, underlining India's avowed status as a secular state. In Islamabad, the delegation met PM Shaukat Aziz's Adviser on Women's Development Nelofer Bakhtiar and Daniyal Aziz, Chairman of the National Reconstruction Board, which is charged with overseeing the devolution plan.

6. Roy told Poloff that the group was surprised in Peshawar by the vocal and articulate women local councillors, and by the showers of rose petals that greeted the group as they went from one meeting to the next. They also took note of the large number of women councilors and civil society activists who met them when they arrived in Jhang late at night, which surprised the Indians who had heard that Jhang was "a very conservative place." The Indian and Pakistani groups also discussed how each country reserves seats for women elected officials, funding for local government development projects, reining in corruption and patronage, and the Indo-Pak peace process.

Well Covered, Abroad and at Home

7. Pakistani media provided nearly daily coverage of the group's travels and meetings in the national English and Urdu language press ("Dawn," "The News," "Jang") and on television. The Urdu press carried more column-inches of coverage overall than did the English. The Indian press reported the trip's highlights in national newspapers, though less thoroughly. The mayors and panchayatis also provided articles and interviews for their "hometown" newspapers in English, Hindi, Malayam, Tamil, Bangla, and other regional languages. The launch of the trip report, which was also partially PA-funded, was attended by 75 dignitaries, grass-root politicians, activists, and Delhi-based media.
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